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ABSTRACT

While student mobility is not a "cause" of low academic achievement, it is one of the correlates of academic performance that should be regarded as a potentially significant factor in shaping students' academic performance. In this document, the Urban Schools Initiative of the Ohio Department of Education makes several recommendations to help urban Ohio students who change schools. Data on mobility rates should be collected in a standardized way by buildings and districts to begin focusing reform efforts to alleviate the effects of student mobility. Each urban school district should initiate a longitudinal study to collect accurate data on student movement over at least 4 years. Once patterns of mobility are identified, schools should undertake steps such as "red flagging" students with three transfers. Each school should provide a welcoming committee for new students, with parent volunteers for the elementary schools and student members for the middle and high schools. Each building should structure the organization and allocation of resources based on the needs of students. Districts should review local decisions that impact mobility, such as special education placement, bilingual programs, and disciplinary transfers. Districts should explore year-round schooling and other models. Districts and the state should exchange information and be sure to provide counseling for parents of transferring students. Some specific suggestions are made for elementary, middle, and high schools. Suggestions are made for funding the creation and maintenance of student mobility data gathering systems. (SLD)

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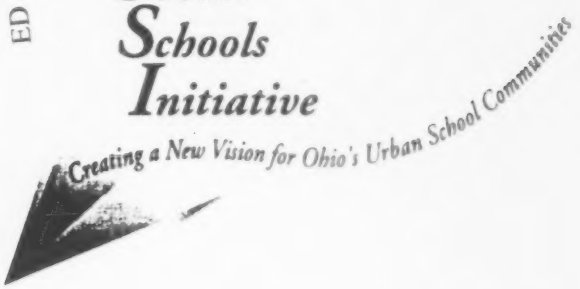

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Student Mobility and Academic Achievement

A Report of the Urban Schools Initiative Mobility Work/Study Group

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Mobility

Urban school districts are confronted with many challenges in educating their student population. These are challenges that rural and suburban school districts do not experience to the same degree. One challenge is student mobility: the movement of students into, out of, and between buildings. Mobility significantly impacts three major areas of student life:

1. Academic achievement: the student's ability to learn and perform well in school (Sewell, 1982; Strait, 1987),
2. Peer relationships: the student's ability to interact positively with other students and
3. Behavior: the extent to which the student becomes involved in discipline referrals.

Many urban families change residences frequently, often several times a year. This results in the children of these families being faced with transitions into new and unique educational environments with each family relocation. Student mobility can, therefore, be viewed as both home movement and school movement. There is no constant predictable time in which this relocation occurs. It can happen any day of the week, any week of the month or any month of the year. Mobility is a measure of how often a student changes schools between or during a school year. This constant movement significantly impacts not only the individual but also the school. With withdrawals and entries occurring regularly throughout the school year, the composition of a class and a school can change dramatically within a school year. It is a constant struggle for the child to adjust to a new classroom (teacher, curriculum, peers) and learn, and it is also a tremendously demanding challenge for a teacher to instruct a class of constantly changing individuals each with unique learning styles and ability levels.

The process of moving can be traumatic for a child, as traumatic as experiencing the death of a loved one or the divorce of their parents (Neuman, 1988). It becomes quite apparent, then, that this experience can have significantly detrimental effects on the rate of learning of the individual child and in the overall performance of an individual classroom, school building or school district. There could be many reasons for student mobility. Frequently they are related to:

Juvenile court system decisions
Discipline transfers
Separation/divorce/custody issues
Foster care
Homelessness/space/money/number of children
Physical abuse
Mental illness
Substance abuse
Single parent families

It is important to note that in many instances more than one of these factors is taking place in the life of the child and resulting in the change in environment. Not only does the child have to adjust to a new home and school setting, but must also deal with the emotional and psychological trauma related to moving. Mobility is a characteristic of the urban student population that school districts and the State of Ohio must address in a proactive manner in order to break the cycle of diminishing student performance. Districts, as well as the state of Ohio, must address student mobility in order to deal with increased student discipline problems, so as to maximize the potential in all of Ohio's youth.

Mobility is not a "cause" of low academic achievement. Yet mobility is one of those correlates with academic performance that "should be regarded as a potentially significant factor in shaping students' academic performance," (Council for Aid to Education, 1992).

Evidence from several recent studies serves to illustrate the impact this one factor has on teaching and learning. According to Wood (1993) highly mobile students were more likely to be retained (23% as opposed to 12% of "stable" children). High mobility lowers student achievement particularly when students are from low-income families (Sewell, 1982; Straits, 1987). A 1994 study by the Government Accounting Office (GAO), found that children who changed schools frequently were more likely to be low achievers in reading and math. Other findings include the fact that 25% of third graders attending inner city schools changed school frequently (3 or more schools since the first grade). Of that group, the third graders who have changed schools frequently are 2 1/2 times as likely to repeat a grade as third graders who have never changed schools (20% vs. 8%). For all income groups, highly mobile students are more likely to repeat a grade than children who never changed schools, and children who have changed schools four or more times were most likely to become dropouts.

For individual students, it is the frequency of moves and the duration of high mobility that are associated with lower academic performance. For schools, it is the percentage of highly mobile students that is correlated with the overall academic achievement of the student body. It becomes abundantly evident that high mobility can wreak havoc on student learning and achievement and threaten the best reform efforts of schools and school districts (Education Week, 1994).

It is difficult for all children to make friends, and even more so for highly mobile children. There is a period of adjustment in each class at the beginning of the school year when new relationships are established and new friendships are forged. Once these relationships are created, it is difficult for new students to gain entrance. Conversely, there is a sense of loss a child experiences when she/he is forced by circumstances beyond her/his control to leave a situation in which there is comfort and belonging, to enter a strange and unknown environment. This can bring about feelings of isolation, alienation, anger and resentment in the child.

Highly mobile children are more likely to have more behavioral problems. As a result of these circumstances and feelings, the child may act out as a call for attention and as an attempt to exert some sense of control, whereas, there may be feelings of powerlessness in other areas of life. These acts are likely to be disruptive to the classroom environment, and counter-productive to teaching and learning. Therefore, as a result of their need for belonging, the child may be labeled a problem child or a trouble maker.

As a result of this evidence, the Urban Schools Initiative believes that data on mobility rates should be collected by buildings and districts to begin focusing reform efforts which alleviate the effects of student mobility. Currently, the collection of data varies from district to district and building to building. We believe that this collection must be standardized across the state. It is also recommended that districts develop action plans to address the impact of high mobility rates where they exist.

Mobility Indices

The movement of students into, out of districts, and between buildings inside districts places significant demands on buildings and districts to accommodate the movements and provide appropriate instruction for students. The purpose of calculating a mobility index is to ascertain the exact level of student movement into and out of a building in order to be able to allocate resources and address the impact this movement has on academic achievement.

FORMULA:

$$\frac{\text{Inter-District Entries} + \text{Intra-District Entries} + \text{Withdrawals}}{\text{Average Daily Membership}}$$

DEFINITIONS:

Inter-District - Student entry from another school district. The period of record from the first day of the second semester of the proceeding school year, through the last day of the first semester of the current school year.

Intra-District - Student entry from one building in a district to another building in the same district. The period of record from the first day of the second semester of the preceding school year, through the last day of the first semester of the current school year.

Withdrawals - All students exiting from a building. The period of record from the first day of the second semester of the preceding school year, through the last day of the first semester of the current school year.

SUB-FORMULAS

Intra-Mobility

$$\frac{\text{Intra-district transfers} + \text{withdrawals}}{\text{Average Daily Membership}}$$

Inter-Mobility

$$\frac{\text{Inter-district transfers} + \text{withdrawals}}{\text{Average Daily Membership}}$$

Data to Gather

In order for a school district to effectively address the issue of student mobility, there must be an accurate measurement of the rate of mobility within and between schools of the same district. A school district must know the exact magnitude of the phenomenon occurring within its boundaries in order to allocate resources to combat its effects.

Each Urban school district should initiate a longitudinal study to collect accurate data on student movement. The collection of data should be at least 4 years in duration in order to accurately reflect patterns of movement and to counteract any short term aberrations that might lead to false and premature conclusions. Data to be collected should include, but may not be limited to building entries and exits with notes indicating district, county, state, and buildings to which students are arriving and from which they are departing. This data will reveal patterns of mobility where they exist and enable school districts to allocate resources and initiate interventions to facilitate student transitions.

Action Steps

General Recommendations

Action steps vary for elementary, middle school, and high schools and their students. However, the following steps remain constant for all three groups in districts with highly mobile students:

- *Districts should require the use of mobility data as they assign resources.*
- *Districts should provide a fax machine in each building for the exchange of records.*
- *A student with three transfers should be "redflagged", records reduced to essentials, and faxed to receiving building once a transfer has begun.*
- *EMIS reporting should include a section for mobility data.*
- *Each school should provide a "welcoming committee" for new students. Elementary buildings could use parent volunteers. Middle schools and high schools should use students. The role of the group would be to establish building expectations for new arrivals, assist in familiarizing students with the environment, and involve the building level intervention specialist.*
- *Each building should structure the organization and allocation of resources based on needs of children. Mobility data should be included in the decision making process of each building.*
- *Districts should review local district decisions that impact mobility such as:*
    - *Special Education placement*
    - *Bilingual programs*
    - *Disciplinary transfers (principals could agree not to "trade" problems)*
- *Districts should explore the use of "Year Around Schooling," especially models that provide students access to other "non-school" but related activities (e.g. Summer Intervention, Parks and Recreation, Internships, etc.)*
- *The Ohio Department of Education should include questions in order to gather mobility data on the proficiency score sheet:*
    - *Was student in the building last year?*
    - *Was student present in December?*
    - *Did the student arrive this semester?"*

- *Districts and the state should use mobility indices in Title 1 resource allocation discussions.*
- *Districts should give some responsibility for mobility issues to Federal Assistance Coordinator/Title 1 Office. Insist that mobility data play a role in comprehensive planning.*
- *Districts shouls support the use of "school wide" (Title 1) efforts in highly mobile buildings.*
- *Districts should conduct an ongoing dialog with other agencies. This dialog could include discussions dealing with housing, utilities, transportation issues, and abuse. School Readiness Resource Centers seem to offer excellent possibilities for assisting with and facilitating these discussions.*
- *Districts should include information on mobility and possible action steps for Intervention Assessment Team training and in-service.*
- *Districts should encourage development of "schools in the community" by*
  - *paying the cost of extended custodian coverage*
  - *providing clean/free space to community groups*
  - *assisting them to run after-school programs (especially middle and elementary school pro grams).*
- *Districts should provide counseling for parents about the effects that movement has on their child's performance and development.*

Grade Specific Recommendations

Some action steps are age/grade level specific. The following are sorted by elementary, middle and high school recommendations.

Elementary

The following recommendations are to provide success for all students in elementary buildings with high mobility rates:

- *Standardize curriculum, including timelines for specific skills to be taught in reading and math. These must remain constant across highly mobile buildings. Consistent and standardized instrutional materials for the district's highly mobile buildings are also necessary. While site-based decisions are valuable in the general context, curriculum and instruction coordination across a mobility cluster is vital.*
- *Classrooms must be structured to meet the academic needs of children.*
- *Create a centralized entry point for elementary buildings in the district. Secretaries are overworked and overloaded. Removing this task from their list of responsibilities increases accuracy and depth of data that might be collected, facilitates the quick exchange of records, and allows buildings to be alerted when a highly mobile student is coming their way. This recommendation does come with qualifiers related to issues about transportation for parents in some communities. However, such a system would ease transfers, and provide for more orderly entry to a building's educational program. Such a center should provide parent information, registration materials, and assistance with student records.*
- *Multiage classrooms which increase the amount of time with one teacher and provide for developmental growth. The instructional process can also be enhanced by "looping" of teachers from one grade to the next.*
- *Mobility indices should be a factor in assigning resources related to student-teacher ratio discussions (1-15) and its implementation.*

Middle School

Middle school students benefit from constancy and a stable foundation. The following recommendations may promote student success within the course and grade level structure:

- *Looping offers the greatest possibility. Increasing the amount of time students have with one teacher is the primary goal. Extending instructional contact over the course of the middle school years creates a stronger connection between students and teachers. These connections help alleviate the effects of mobility.*
- *Provide tutoring for transfer students to "get them up to speed" upon entry into a building or program.*
    - *Schedule students to spend more time with fewer teachers, such as in block scheduling.*
    - *Assign a student buddy to the new student.*
    - *Provide a teacher/advisor to the new student.*

High School

The high school requires different kinds of efforts because of the difficulty of scheduling classes, course credits and sequencing of work. Our first goal with high school students is to get them into a school/program and keep them there. Therefore, action steps for this age group should include:

- *Guarantee of transportation to one building chosen by the student and family. "Choose a building and we'll keep you there"*
- *Provide tutoring for transfer students to "get them up to speed" upon entry into a building or program.*
    - *Schedule students to spend more time with fewer teachers/such as in block scheduling.*
    - *Assign a student buddy to the new student.*
    - *Provide a teacher/advisor to the new student.*

Budget Proposal—Mobility and Student Achievement

This work/study group believes that funding in the amount of $1.5 million in FY2000 and $1.5 million in FY2001is needed to support the creation and maintenance of student mobility data gathering systems and action plans including:

- Increase and formalize USI efforts to manage, organize and support the organization of mobility data collection and the development of action plans involving cross-agency collaboration.
- Create district-based, technology-based systems of student tracking by developing partnerships with data collection businesses/Management Information Systems partners.
- Identify and monitor student mobility in highly mobile schools and mobility clusters in each USI district.
- Support, plan and institute actions for dealing with high mobility, such as mobility support training for school IAT's, development of student entry plans in high mobility buildings, purchase of fax machines for the quick exchange of records and forms within mobility clusters, and development of electronic portfolio systems.
- Implement standardized curriculum planning and implementation in highly mobile schools and mobility clusters.
- Implement student academic assistance for transfer students (including before or after school).

Conclusion

Student mobility continues to be one of the most difficult issues to deal with as Urban Schools Initiative districts attempt to eliminate barriers to student academic achievement. Recent efforts in other parts of the country have shown increasing evidence of the effectiveness of strategies such as those outlined here.

Clearly, students move for a variety of reasons. Many students can be helped by collaboration with other governmental institutions such as housing authorities, children services agencies, etc. Students will continue to move, they will continue to enter school late in the year which could at times be detrimental to the educational environment of other students and themselves. Teacher and building time on integrating new students into the educational environment must not be allowed to negatively impact opportunities for learning. Support personnel assigned to welcome, assess, coordinate and tutor highly mobile students will raise levels of academic achievement.

As we continue to strive for the vision of urban education in Ohio outlined in *Through the Eyes of Children* we must work to answer the question, "*Kasserian ingera*" (And how are the children?). This question, originating with the Masai of East Africa, guides the efforts of Ohio's Urban Schools Initiative. USI has worked diligently to break down traditional barriers. Our effort to alleviate the effects of mobility on student achievement must be a part of that work. Building shared ownership for all urban students and their communities is the ultimate goal of all our efforts.

As *Through the Eyes of Children*, stated, "We need a vision for urban school communities that lives not only in the future but also in the present—not only on paper but also in the hearts and minds of Ohio's citizens. We need a vision that continues evolving in the actions of urban community members—a vision that is the focus of state and local decision making—a vision that all urban community members can see in their everyday surroundings and interactions—a vision that becomes increasingly clear in the experiences that shape the lives of urban children and teenagers." (p. 4)

- We can create a living vision by inspiring urban youth with the caring actions of people in their communities....
- We can create a living vision by surrounding urban youth with a caring network of people from different state and local agencies....
- We can create a living vision by enabling children and teenagers in urban communities to experience the joy, the power, and the freedom of learning...
- We can encourage them to engage their minds every minute of the day...

Dealing with issues of student mobility in Ohio's schools is a critically important place to start. It is the work/study group's hope that this document will serve as a first step to addressing student mobility.

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